Clarksdale/Coahoma County Mississippi

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Clarksdale, Mississippi is located in Coahoma County, which borders the Mississippi River in a region known as the Lower Mississippi River Delta. Although Coahoma County is steeped in agrarian history and agriculture continues to be important, the county's nonfarming private sector economy is driven by manufacturing, retail trade and services. In 1998 there were an estimated 14,430 full-time and part-time employees in the county, with approximately 10 percent in manufacturing, 15 percent in retail and 35 percent in services. The comparison to Mississippi is shown in the following table:

1998

Employees in	Coahoma	Mississippi
Manuf'ing	10%	17%
Retail Trade	15%	16%
Services	35%	24%

There were approximately 697 businesses in Coahoma County in 1997, with an estimated 26 percent in retail trade, 36 percent in services and 1 percent in manufacturing. Only two establishments employed over 500 people and approximately 602 employed less than 20 people.

In 1998, the population of Coahoma County was estimated at 31,277 with about 39 percent of the population employed full-time or part-time. In 1998, about 54 percent of the county's population were between the ages of 18 and 64. The unemployment estimated average for the county in 1999 was 9.0

percent (5.4 percent in the state). Estimated per capita income for the County was $10,726 in 1988 ($11,695 for the state) and $16,727 in 1998 ($19,776 for the state).

Population decreased approximately 4 percent between 1988 and 1998. In 1997, the population was approximately 34 percent white and 66 percent black. In 1990, Educational attainment in the county, for persons 25 years and over was 54 percent for high school graduates (64 percent for the state) and 15 percent for college graduates (15 percent for the state).

The Mississippi Workshop

Over 30 individuals from Clarksdale, Cleveland, Greenwood and surrounding areas participated in TEAM DelTA's Workshop, held May 23rd in Cleveland, Miss. The workshop offered information about how to create more local wealth and higher-paying jobs and about the emerging technology-based economy. Participants provided TEAM DelTA with a better understanding of regional needs, concerns and the kinds of local technology-based economic development currently underway. Participants also completed questionnaires giving their opinions about the usefulness of specified topics and the amount of technology-based economic development strategic planning already taking place in their communities.

Participants had this to say about Mississippi's Delta region:

Strengths and Opportunities

- Import (e.g. tourism) & Export (e.g., culture food, music, art)
- Good natural resources, location, inexpensive power
- Have local quality innovative companies
- Build clusters - life sciences, metal
- Broad access to community colleges (MDCC, CCC), good high school programs, responsive universities (MVSU, DSU)
- Have people and can increase skilled-labor pool via training investments

Challenges

- Overcome negative perceptions about Miss., the Delta & the ability/capability of Delta people
- Fear or resistance to change (new processes, products, technology)
- Lack of emerging and/or youth leadership, leader development & work ethics & life skills programs
- Workforce development – (need more people with basic skills & technically capable workforce
- Soft Infrastructure – more family entertainment, retail, health care
- Locating & keeping educated/trained people
- Lack of access to capital

Participant Response to Questionnaire

At the state regional level, participant responses to the workshop questionnaire indicate that **information about these topics would be most useful:**

- Concept of value-added,
- Role of technology & Innovation
- Clusters and networks

- Workforce skills
- Social capital

Participants gave the **lowest topic usefulness ratings to:**

- Globalization
- Traded sector(s)

Participants indicated they knew of very little over-all action planning. Improving K-12 education was the only topic perceived as having high amounts of planning throughout the region. However, some planning was identifying for each community (e.g., incubators, networks, training).

The Community Technology Assessment

TEAM DelTA held the community technology assessment meeting for the Clarksdale community on August 16, 2000. The goals of the assessment were to identify the community's general perspectives and priorities on technology-based economic development and gain a better understanding of the key organizations and structure in the community. Fourteen individuals in formal or informal leadership positions in the community, or who offered key information, participated in the facilitated discussion to identify a potential vision for Clarksdale; priorities for technology-based economic development; and, (1) key high value-adding firms (companies), (2) suppliers and support businesses, (3) soft infrastructure entities and (4) elements of physical infrastructure in the Clarksdale area. Gaps in the four layers were also identified.

Participants wrote a brief description of what they wanted Clarksdale to "be good at or known for" – Here's the result: " to be a safe, friendly community with high values, quality educational and healthcare systems, very low unemployment rates and good recreational facilities that work to offer a good standard of living to residents and support business, high-tech industry, tourism and hospitality services."

Participants were given a hypothetical pot of money for technology-based economic development and asked how they would **prioritize economic development spending over the next year** in the areas of: recruiting outside industry, helping locally-owned existing businesses, starting new locally-owned businesses, workforce development and education, technology transfer and financial investment. **Listed below are participant priorities:**

- Workforce & ed. 64% of $
- Existing businesses 52% of $
- New businesses 28% of $
- Recruiting 20% of $
- Technology transfer 20% of $
- Financial investment 16% of $

When asked if the Internet was changing everything, the consensus was that the internet influences the speed of communication and commerce, and enables quicker and more access to resources, products and services. Great concern was expressed about the digital divide: "This technology is not being accessed by the entire population." Another view suggests that while the internet allows individual access to the world, the internet also reduces "emphasis on manual labor" (e.g., affecting the number of low-skill jobs, level of health, types of health concerns, etc.).

To find the existing technology resources and gaps in resources, participants compiled four long lists of (1) **Key firms** (included were Cooper Tires, Delta Wire, Standard Industries, North West Mississippi Medical Center and Saf-T-Cart); (2) **Support organizations** or businesses, which contribute to the success of key firms by offering supplies, services or other support (included were Aaron Henry Community Health Center, North West Mississippi Medical Center, Banks, Clarksdale Utilities, Coahoma Community College,

BellSouth, Jim Dandy Trucking); (3) **Soft infrastructure** (included were Mississippi Employment Service Commission, K-12 Schools, Aaron Henry Community Health Center Programs, Coahoma Community College, Chamber of Commerce & Industrial Foundation, Public Library); and, (4) **Hard infrastructure** (have access to a port, to four-lane U.S. highways, the Helena Arkansas bridge, airstrip, bus line, incubator, some CIT infrastructure). Note: a few critical organizations fell into several lists.

Participants were asked to estimate the perceived involvement (connectivity) among the organizations identified above. Their responses indicate the **community resources perceived to be the most interconnected are** the economic development entities, community college, utilities and health care providers. This group could provide the core for more detailed planning and implementation to achieve a community technology strategy and for pulling the community together to implement action.

Resource gaps or needed improvements include: cost-effective CIT infrastructure, rail service, a renovated airport, more entertainment facilities & parks; more local support services/products for industry (e.g., parts, construction, industrial trash pick-up, chemical supplier); more flexible daycare and youth programs; industrial skills training; and, more coordinated relationships between local industry and middle/high schools.

Possible Next Steps

- Form a detailed Community Technology Plan (including CIT infrastructure, industrial needs, aggregating demand strategies);
- Explore/pursue building clusters & networks, technology business incubator, accessing capital;
- Explore potential business or other opportunities to fill resource gaps;
- Form area alliances & work to raise awareness about technology, seize opportunities & reduce gaps.